

April 25, 2023

PERSPECTIVE

California's Clean Fleets Rule Could Make Restoring Power and Water During an Emergency More Difficult

BY

Barry Moline, Executive Director, California Municipal Utilities Association
Michael Webster, Executive Director, Southern California Public Power Authority
Randy S. Howard, General Manager, Northern California Power Agency

One of California's most significant clean air and climate change proposals is close to being approved with a major flaw that could risk longer water and electric outages during emergencies.

The Advanced Clean Fleets (ACF) rule, proposed by the California Air Resources Board (CARB), is designed to transition all medium- and heavy-duty vehicles in the state to electric- or hydrogen-powered vehicles. This will result in cleaner air in vulnerable communities where thousands of trucks motor through daily. It will help cut carbon emissions from the transportation sector, which makes up most of the state's climate pollutants. Overall, the rule is essential to achieve California's environmental goal of a carbon-neutral economy by 2045.

But the proposed rule's major concern is that it may hinder many local utilities' ability to respond to emergencies, natural disasters, and significant disruptions. Customers and communities served by local governments that own and operate their own water, wastewater, and electric utilities will be at risk.

Californians know too well how extreme weather events, wildfires, and earthquakes cause power outages. When a severe "bomb cyclone" storm battered California in January 2023 — bringing unusually high winds and long-lasting precipitation — highly skilled utility crews worked around the clock to restore power and fix and repair water and flood protection infrastructure. During the emergency, local utility crews deployed trucks 24 hours a day, for multiple days in a row, to get the job done. The heavy specialty vehicles that utility crews

use daily reach power lines; clear debris; transport, remove, and set utility poles; move and set critical water infrastructure; and provide water purification for communities. During emergencies, this important work is often done under challenging conditions and in rural, isolated locations.

Today, these specialty utility vehicles are not widely available in electric or hydrogen models. That likely will continue to be the case for the next several years — a period when the ACF rule will require California utilities to purchase and utilize zero-emission vehicles. While these vehicles account for only a small number statewide, they play an outsize role in safely maintaining and restoring the electrical grid and water infrastructure.

To be clear, publicly owned utilities do not want an exemption to the rule; generally, public water, wastewater, and electric utilities support purchasing zero-emission vehicles wherever feasible. But given the stakes — and risks to public health and safety — the rule must be amended to provide reasonable, practical accommodations when a zero-emission vehicle cannot do the same emergency work as a traditional utility vehicle. This prudent amendment would help protect local communities statewide that serve Californians.

We must also recognize the reality that vehicles powered by hydrogen — not electric — are better suited for the work of many utility vehicles. It is paradoxical to rely on an electric vehicle to restore power when there is no electricity to keep the vehicle charged. Hydrogen vehicles, on the

other hand, are not dependent on the grid and can be refueled quickly in the field, allowing a utility crew to operate around the clock while repairing damaged infrastructure. The widespread deployment of hydrogen vehicles is, however, on a slower timeline than electric vehicles. The federal government is providing billions of dollars to build hydrogen hubs across the country, which should help expand the hydrogen vehicle industry. Until then, utilities need the flexibility to purchase traditional vehicles when a zero-emission vehicle is unavailable or cannot meet emergency response needs.

The California Air Resources Board is tasked with reducing climate pollutants and cleaning the air, but CARB does not have expertise in emergency response. On the other hand, local governments are on the front lines in responding to disasters, and the public expects them to be fully prepared and equipped to protect their communities. Any delay in repairing damaged water, wastewater, and electrical infrastructure increases health and safety risks for Californians. Power outages also affect air quality when homes and businesses turn on their gas-powered generators until the lights return.

CARB must take these emergency response concerns seriously and amend the Advanced Clean Fleets rule to accommodate the essential work of publicly owned electric and water utilities. When the grid goes down, or the water stops flowing, restoring essential public services quickly is a big deal for keeping our residents safe and the economy going strong.